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ABSTRACT

This paper depicts the historical background and lifestyle of the Powhatan Indians. There are approximately 30 such tribes in present-day Maryland, Virginia, and near the North Carolina border. The name Powhatan is defined, and the history and current lifestyles of the Virginia and New Jersey Powhatans are described. Contemporary Powhatan social concerns are outlined including the advantages and disadvantages of the civil-rights movement in the 1960s. Contemporary Powhatan art is described, and it is emphasized that both traditional and contemporary thinking does not separate art and life, and that Powhatan women were and still are part of this great women-centered art. In addition, the effects of the Colonial Era on traditional Powhatan art are explored. Contemporary Powhatans have preserved the traditional arts of clay pots and pipes, basketry, some beadworking, and turkey-feather knitting/weaving. The techniques, design elements, and significance of their featherwork, basketry, and pottery are described. In the conclusion, it is demonstrated that although politically and socially the Indians were oppressed, through a resurgence of ethnic pride, contemporary Powhatans are asserting their heritage through spiritual ceremonies, public festivals, and the arts. (KM)

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Historical Background

Powhatan Indians are the indigenous Algonquian speaking peoples of what is now called the Chesapeake Bay, an inlet of the Middle Atlantic coast in present day Virginia and Maryland. Powhatans have an unbroken history of thousands of years of settlement along the coastal areas of the mid-Atlantic. About 3,000 years ago Algonkians lived in the region north of the Great Lakes. From there they spread west, east, and south. Various groups migrated southward along the Atlantic coast. At the end of the 15th century, the Algonkians had spread from the Rocky Mountains of present-day Alberta, Canada in the northwest, to the Labrador Peninsula in eastern Canada, and down to Cape Lookout in present-day North Carolina (Feest, 1990).

The approximately 30 Indian groups now known as the Powhatan tribes were originally joined by their languages and their common location in present-day Maryland, Virginia, and the North Carolina border. At the end of the 1500's these people were united into a political confederacy by Powhatan, a paramount chief of several of the tribes. In 1646 the Powhatan Indians signed the oldest treaty written in Turtle Island (North America) between the English and the indigenous people. Out of the approximately 30 tribes affiliated militarily or politically with the Powhatan confederacy in the 1600's, seven survived and are flourishing today. Surviving tribes include the Chickahominy, Eastern Chickahominy, Mattaponi, Nansemond, Pamunkey, Rappahannock, and Upper Mattaponi.

Against many odds the Renape (human beings) survived. Renape refers to an ethnic group speaking a common language. Powhatan refers to a political

identity as manifested in alliances and confederations (Horse, 1987). The name "Powhatan" is derived from a paramount chiefs' political organization that covered most of the Virginia coastal plain and which was organized by the man, Powhatan, who took his name from his natal town, Powhatan, near the falls of the James River. The term "Powhatan" also applies to the closely related Algonquian dialects spoken in the region (Rountree, 1989). Powhatan-Renape Nation is a term presently used by many contemporary descendants to refer to the union of political and ethnic/linguistic identity (Horse, 1987).

Virginia Powhatans

The state of Virginia has seven Powhatan tribal organizations. Each tribe has a chief, assistant chief, tribal council and assorted members. Together they number approximately 3,000 Powhatan all over the state. Two tribes, the Pamunkey and Mattaponi have state reservations on their ancestral lands which date back to the treaties signed in the 1600's. Although the other tribes are also state recognized, they lost their reservations through the usual land manipulations. To compensate, tribes like the Chickahominy, purchased some of their ancestral land.

The Mattaponi have a 125-acre reservation at the Mattaponi River in King William County dating back to 1658. Today it has a small museum, trading post, and craft shop where women make pottery, beadwork, and turkey feather headdresses in traditional fashion. The Pamunkey claim descent from Chief Powhatan and his daughter Pocahontas. They still practice pottery techniques dating from aboriginal times and have a museum and trading post.

The Upper Mattaponi are a group of urban non-reservation Indians who trace their origins to the Pamunkey and Mattaponi tribes. They also are known as the Adamstown band because of the large number of Adams families descended

from an early Adams ancestor who married an Indian woman. The Upper Mattaponi headquarters is in King William County. The chief, Dr. Linwood Custalow, is one of the founders of the national organization, the Association of American Indian Physicians (Green, 1989).

Located in Charles City County, between Richmond and Williamsburg, is the tribal headquarters of the Chickahominy tribe. The tribe owns 2,500 acres of land. It is one of the more politically active Virginia tribes, holding offices on the county school board, planning commission, and in local government. The Eastern Chickahominy are located in New Kent County, 25 miles east of Richmond.

The United Rappahannock originated in what is now Richmond County and migrated to King, Queen, Caroline, and Essex Counties. The Nansemond originally lived in what is now Suffolk City, but have since relocated to Norfolk, Chesapeake, and Virginia Beach (Green, 1987).

New Jersey Powhatans

During the 1940's large numbers of Powhatans migrated north in search of better job opportunities and to escape from southern racial discrimination laws. Today many descendants of that earlier exodus live in southern New Jersey (Scheyichbi). In April 1982, the New Jersey Powhatan Renape Nation regained a land base through negotiations with the state of New Jersey and their chief Nemattanew. The Rankokus (living stars) Indian Reservation is a cultural and educational center that has a re-constructed Powhatan ancestral village, herbal medicine walk, library, museum, and gift shop. Chief Nemattanew, also a Pipe Carrier for the nation, has been instrumental in reviving the Powhatan Algonquian language (Horse, 1987). A prominent Powhatan

affiliated with Rankokus Reservations activities is Dr. Jack Forbes, Director of Native American Studies at the University of California, Davis.

Contemporary Powhatan Social Concerns:

Maintaining the Traditions

The 1960's civil rights movement has been a mixed blessing for Powhatan Indians and other southeastern Indian groups. The positive and negative impacts of the movement are still felt today. According to Helen C. Rountree, an anthropologist specializing in Virginia Indians, civil rights gains such as equal job opportunities, equal housing, and an end to racist Jim Crow laws were a welcome relief to all southern Indians.

However, the loss of segregated Indian schools that stressed Indian culture and traditions, decreased opportunities for Indians to maintain their cultural identity. Schools and land that Indians brought and built with their own money and manpower were illegally confiscated by the state, all in the name of "integration" and "equal opportunity." Through successful legal action, the Upper Mattaponi regained their old school building from the county school board supervisors in 1985.

Fortunately, the Powhatan Indians do not have the extensive poverty, alcohol and drug abuse problems that are prevalent among many Western tribes. A sense of community, extended family relationships, and church activities help maintain discipline and self-sufficiency.

Contemporary Powhatan Art: The Female Influence Continues

Unfortunately, when Native American art is studied as part of art history or explored in the studio, the past is usually emphasized. Romantic misconceptions of Indians as non-technological stone-age artisans dominate

the literature, thereby reinforcing the tendency to dismiss the evolving contemporary Native American culture.

In the hundreds of Native American languages there is no word that comes close to the Western definition of art. Indian art is seldom "art for arts sake." Both traditional and contemporary thinking does not separate art and life, what is beautiful and what is functional. Art, beauty, and spirituality are intertwined in the routine of living.

The Native American view of the spiritual and physical world uses symbols freely to enrich daily life and ceremonies. Symbols are protectors and reminders of the living universe, bridging the gap between the spiritual and physical realm. Symbols are used in ritual performances to portray the power in the cosmos (Rubinstein 1982).

Centuries before European settlers arrived in Turtle Island, Indian women were producing fine art in basketry, pottery, quillwork, weaving and leather painting. Indian women dug clay for their pots, gathered reeds and rushes for basketry, and worked with skins for painting. Indian women developed a sensitivity to colors and textures found in nature and related designs to the space and form on which they were placed. Working communally, Indian women learned their crafts from grandmothers, mothers, and aunts (Rubinstein, 1982).

Powhatan women were and still are part of this great women centered art. Scattered throughout the U.S. are women artists of Powhatan descent, some tribally affiliated and others not for various political reasons. Both reservation based and urban women of Powhatan descent are contributing to the continuation of artistic traditions. Some of the urban based women artists of Powhatan descent are California photographer and printmaker, Monique Faison,

painter and lecturer in pre-Columbian art at the University of Pittsburgh, Andrea Poole, and art therapist, photographer, and assistant professor of art and design at Purdue University, Phoebe Durfrene.

The November 1988 Vienna Virginia Metro installation, "Totems of Powhatan" by Rose Powhatan and Michael Auld was both an historic and aesthetic event. The series of six totems reflects the artists commitment to preserving American Indian culture. Three chiefs from the Virginia Powhatan tribes attended the dedication ceremony.

Rose Powhatan, in collaboration with her husband, Michael Auld, designed the six pressure-treated pine totems to depict facets of the Algonquian people of Virginia. The following is a brief description of the six themes.

"Algonquian Myth of Creation: Michabo (the Hare) is hunting one day with his wolves, who suddenly disappear into a lake. He follows them as the entire earth becomes covered by water. Michabo sends a raven to find a piece of earth to start a new world, but the raven returns without success. Another raven is sent, but he also fails. Finally, a muskrat is able to find enough earth to rebuild the fertile land. Michabo shoots arrows into the naked trees to make them flower. He marries the muskrat and their children become the human race.

Attan Akamik (Our Fertile Country): Pictographic symbols describe the beauty and bounty of Virginia. Both flora and fauna attest to the richness of the land.

Pocahontas Story: Indians, while hunting, discover a European standing in shallow water. The Indians agree to kill him at the chief's seat. An Indian maiden disagrees with the Indian men. They decide not to harm the European. He is freed and wished well.

Powhatan: The mantle of Powhatan* forms the main design of this piece. The totem shows a central figure accompanied by two martens (a symbol of Powhatan's Clan). The 32 clusters of circles represent the 32 Indian nations that comprise the Powhatan Confederacy. The British entry into Powhatan's territory is represented at the bottom of the totem.

*The original mantle is on display at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England.

Truce Treaty: This totem commemorates the 1646 treaty confirming peace between the Indians and the English. The story tells of how each year, when the geese fly south, Indian braves go on a journey across the water. They travel to see the governor of Virginia. They meet and agree to smoke the pipe of peace. They present furs and other game.

Old Dominion: The turtle at the tope of this totem represents 'Big Turtle Island,' a Native American name for the United States. The Seal of Virginia signifies the union of the people found in Virginia today. Flags from many nations depict the presence of European, African, Asian and South American residents in Virginia."¹

Despite regional and tribal diversity, there exists a spiritual unity among Native Americans that is manifested in the arts. The creative process in which artists transform visions is viewed as part of life's mystery. It is one of the reasons that Indian art is inseparable from religion, philosophy, and healing. Music, dance, and ritual are the core of the Native American aesthetic experience. They form and focus visual art forms, which are only paraphernalia in the holistic realm of tribal rites. Rituals, ceremonies, and visual symbols establish and renew relationships between humankind, nature, and the animal world (Rubin, 1989).

Upstreaming

Traditional Powhatan Art: Continuity

From the Colonial Era to the Present

Between 1622-1644 numerous battles were fought between the Powhatans and the European colonists. The Powhatan population declined and many Indians were forced out of their ancestral areas. Defeated tribes were forced to accept tributary status or positions as indentured servants. To survive many Indians worked for whites as artisans in the crafts of leather tanning, moccasin manufacturing, basketry, and pottery. Indian women sold pottery that combined the traditional techniques of working clay with vessel shapes suitable for use by the colonists. Of their traditional arts, the Powhatans of today have preserved the manufacture of clay pots and pipes, basketry, some beadworking, and turkey-feather knitting/weaving.

Featherwork

One of the most unique traditional Powhatan arts that has survived from ancient times, through the colonial era and up to the present is feather weaving. Weaving feathers into textile fabrics has been recorded in such diverse locations as the Pacific Coast, Mexico, Ecuador, and Polynesia. This technique was distributed from Southeastern tribes in the Mississippi and Gulf areas to tribes along the Atlantic coast such as the Delawares of Pennsylvania and the Narragansetts of New England (Speck, 1928).

Knitted textiles have been made with wild turkey feathers inserted at the loops, covering one side of the fabric. The material is native raised, homespun cotton. The feathers used are wild turkey, domestic turkey, shelldrake, Guinea fowl, Virginia cardinal, flicker, and commercial ostrich-feathers dyed blue. Using steel or bone needles, a plain knitting stitch is used. A single feather is worked into the fabric, caught by the base or shank of the plume. The feathers are firmly attached so that none of the feathers shake loose. Leg bones of herons were used before trade needles were introduced (Ibid., 1928).

Items decorated with woven turkey feathers include moccasin-tops, bags, capes, fans, hats, and headdress regalia for Powhatan chiefs. The anthropologist Frank Speck recorded the oral traditions associated with feather weaving from Mrs. John Langston of the Mattaponi reservation and Margaret Adams from the Pamunkey reservation. Both women re-created traditional articles to aid him in his research.

Speck described a cape designed around 1919 made of native-spun cotton, wild turkey breast feathers, and white shelldrake feathers. The color of the body was iridescent black and bronze and the ends varied with black and white

feathers. The cape could be tied around the neck with strings of the cotton foundation woven with fine duck-down.

Currently turkey feathers are used for headdress ceremonial regalia worn by Powhatan chiefs. The feathers are woven into a beaded cloth headband and stick straight up as opposed to the fanned-out style worn by Plains Indian chiefs. This type of feather headdress is popular among other eastern tribes as well.

Basketry

In early accounts of Virginia Indians, John Smith described "grass" baskets woven by Powhatan Indians. Those "grass" baskets were probably constructed from *Yucca filamentosa*, a plant known to the present Rappahannock descendants as "bog grass", to Pamunkeys as "silk grass" and to other Powhatans as yucca. Other natural materials for basket weaving that have persisted from colonial times are the blades of the *Juncus* or *Scirpus*, more commonly called "rushes", and mulberry fibers (Speck, 1925).

Both the Chickahominy and Rappahannock tribes have maintained basketry craft techniques dating from the colonial era. Often constructed of splints of white oak, the most common forms are rectangular and circular bottoms. Round bottom baskets are called "rib baskets". An auxiliary rim hoop between the inner and outer rim hoops, bounded by an extra loop, strengthens the baskets. This accentuated feature is also found in basketware among the Nanticoke and Delaware (Ibid., 1925).

A more modern style found among the Rappahannocks is pine-cone basketry. Used for storing small articles, they are made by sewing pine-cone blades upon a cardboard or leather surface and joining the pieces together to form the

desired shape. Various basket styles, both traditional and modern, are presently sold at annual Virginia Indian festivals and pow wows.

Pottery

The oldest extensively written records of Powhatan pottery are those of Pollard's, written for the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology. His informants described techniques to gather clay and produce pottery objects, some of which were eventually given to the Smithsonian for the World's Columbian Exposition.

The clay used is taken from the Potomac formation of the geologic series which yields pottery clays in Virginia, Maryland, and New Jersey. The opening of a clay mine was a feast day for the entire tribe, with each family taking home a share of the clay. After the clay was dried, passed through a sieve, and pounded in a mortar; it was strengthened by mixing it with pulverized burned freshwater mussel flesh and shells. Wet articles were dried in the sun, smoothed with mussel shell, burnished with a rubbing stone, then placed in a circle tempered with a slow fire. The next procedure was to cover the pottery with dry pine bark and place it in a kiln. The ware was considered burnt sufficiently when smoke came out in a clear volume (Pollard, 1894).

In the 1800's Pamunkey Indians made kitchenware and pipes for themselves and for sale to non-Indians. During the 1880's while the tribe was performing state supported plays of the Pocahontas-John Smith legend, one of the most popular props was a multi-stemmed "friendship pipe". Consisting of 4-7 stems inserted into a single clay bowl, it was used to celebrate victories and during council meetings. The style originated from the South Carolina Catawba Indians (Feest, 1990). It is difficult to interpret the exact meaning of these pipes. There is a variety in the number of stems attached to the pipes

but the significance of those numbers is partly speculative. The number seven is sacred to many Southeastern tribes, especially the Cherokee. Since the Cerokees and Catawbas are neighbors, the use of 7 stemmed pipes may have originated there and been introduced when several Catawba families intermarried with the Pamunkeys. The number seven has been interpreted as representing the four cardinal directions plus the sky and the earth and the space between the directions. Some pipes have only four stems. The number four, corresponding to the four directions. Some pipes have only four stems. The number four, corresponding to the four directions, is sacred to almost all Indian tribes in North and South America.

Demands for Powhatan pottery decreased with the introduction of inexpensive mass-produced kitchenware. However, pottery crafts were revived and sold to tourists during the Great Depression to supplement incomes. The state of Virginia established a pottery school on the reservation in 1932 to teach reservation children about their traditional culture. A white instructor taught the use of the potter's wheel, glazing, the use of molds, and introduced Indian motifs from other tribes. Very little respect was given to authentic Pamunkey techniques (Ibid., 1990).

Native American views of the spiritual and physical would use symbols freely to enrich daily life and ceremonies. As protectors and reminders of the universe, symbols bridge the gap between the spiritual and physical realm.

Although contemporary Powhatan culture has lost much of its early symbolism and rituals due to forced assimilation, the essence remains. Woven turkey-feather headdress regalia, the use of pipes, and picture writing are still prevalent in meetings, voting, dedication ceremonies, burials, and

tributes to the state governor. These life sustaining activities are painted symbolically on pottery.

Since the early 1960's some Indian artists have been stylistically part of the mainstream world, while the work of others sometimes reflects social movements of the Indian community, and some artists continue the traditions of the past (Rubinstein, 1982). Many urban Powhatan artists are part of the contemporary art world. But the older Pamunkey women still living on the reservation have chosen to perpetuate their ancient traditions. Unfortunately, there are very few younger women willing to learn the traditional crafts.

Too often creativity is assumed to be synonymous with innovation, the avante-garde, and the repudiation of traditional art forms. But recreating time proven designs and reinterpreting traditional symbolism can also be creative.

Although a wide range of approaches can be found in Native American art, it all expresses a deep pride in the American Indian heritage. Powhatan artists of today are still involved in the production of paraphernalia that establishes and renews relationships between humanity, nature, and the animal world. Their Native American aesthetic experience has survived colonialism, forced servitude, racial discrimination, and rapid technological changes.

Prehistory and the Southeastern Culture

Prehistoric symbolism increased in the eastern United States around 1,000 B.C., when the Woodland cultures began to take shape, particularly along the lower Mississippi River and the lower Ohio River. Although the people continued some modes of Archaic subsistence, the beginnings of horticulture developed and Indians began manufacturing elaborate artifacts to be used in

ceremonial and artistic contexts (Hudson, 1984). During the Woodland period, pottery was manufactured all over the eastern United States. Artifacts of carved stone and hammered copper were also developed. The animal symbolism used to embellish these objects (buzzards, falcons, owls, eagles, frogs, serpents, and turtles) became widespread among indigenous people now called Southeastern Indians.

Design elements included an emphasis on raptorial birds with curved beaks and talons, opposed or split-representations, in which a creature is either split down the middle, so that the left and right sides are depicted or represented in opposition or conflict, and geometric forms such as circles and four-sided figures. These geometric motifs were incised on stone and ceramics and used to form mounds and earthworks (Hudson, 1984).

Another Woodland custom practiced by later Southeastern Indians was elaborate burial. Bodies, bones, and cremated remains were interred along with materials such as mica from the Appalachian Mountains, copper from the Great Lakes, obsidian from the Rocky Mountains, and sea shells from the Gulf and Atlantic Coasts. Earth mounds shaped like animals and geometric shapes were piled over the remains of the dead. European colonists arriving in North Carolina and Virginia found Algonkian Indians maintaining mortuaries in which the remains of esteemed dead were kept in a manner reminiscent of the Woodland culture (Hudson, 1984).

Around AD 800 Southeastern Indians began practicing maize agriculture. Maize cultivation required labor and planning in growing cycles. Accompanying this horticultural development was a widespread symbolic system called the Southern Cult or Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. When Spanish explorers came to the South in the 16th century this complex was flourishing. However,

European epidemic diseases caused a population collapse and societal deterioration. Many of the symbols associated with the complex were no longer employed when the English arrived on the Atlantic Coast a century later.

Pocahontas: The Legend Continues

Any article about Powhatan culture, whether dealing with contemporary issues or the past would be incomplete without mentioning the legendary Pocahontas.

Briefly, Pocahontas (Matoaka) 1597-1617, was the daughter of Chief Powhatan (Wahunsenacawh) and became one of the most famous Indian women in the world. On her trip to England with her English husband, John Rolfe, her sister, Matchama, Powhatan's priest-counsellor, Tomocomo, and several other Powhatan men and women, Pocahontas was treated like a "princess" because the Europeans considered her father a "king". Seven months later she died in England at the age of 20 on March 21, 1617.

There were numerous legends surrounding the historical person Pocahontas. The most celebrated is her alleged rescue of the colonist John Smith. Powhatan's attempt to have Smith clubbed to death on an altar stone and his "rescue" by Pocahontas may have been part of an adoption ceremony. After the rescue, Powhatan gave Smith a town to rule and said that he would consider Smith a son. This procedure is similar to other eastern Indian adoptions in which a captive becomes a member of the family. Since Smith published this story 17 years after the event, its accuracy or truthfulness is questionable (Rountree, 1989).

Whether legend or fact, many contemporary Virginians, Indian and white claim descent from Pocahontas and John Rolfe.

Conclusion

In Remembrance of the Past:

Its Legacy for the Future

In 1622, Opechancanough, Powhatans brother and successor, led his warriors against the colonists who were encroaching on Indian lands and destroying Indian culture. For years after 1622 and up to 1944 there were ongoing battles between the Powhatans and the English colonists. Militarily and socially, the Indians were the losers. After the 1644 massacre, the Powhatan population suffered a great decline and many Indians abandoned or were driven out of part of the Tidewater area. Eventually defeated, independent tribes came to terms with the whites and accepted tributary status or worse, positions as indentured servants (Wright, 1981).

Courts took measures to extend Indian servitude. Some Indians became perpetual servants. Whether indentured servants or "free", Powhatans worked for whites as wage laborers, domestics, hunters, and artisans. After Bacon's Rebellion. Pamunkey women sometimes worked as maids and the men as hunters. Native artisans continued in their crafts, especially leather tanning and the making of moccasins. Indians continued making and selling clay pipes, other types of pottery, and basketry.

Virginia Indians became Christians as part of the acculturation process, usually joining fundamentalist Protestant denominations. The Powhatans followed a lifestyle similar to their small farmer neighbors.

As the 18th century progressed, Virginia Indians, like many Indians of other areas, became aware of their Indianness, despite different customs and ancient feuds. Sign language originated among Southern Indians before spreading to the plains. Trade jargons such as Occaneechee and Mobilian

developed and flourished after contact. 18th and 19th century attempts at Indian unity helped to reestablish defunct chiefdoms in the South (Wright, 1981). The impression that after the 1830's all Southern Indians had been killed or relocated to Oklahoma is erroneous.

Indians of numerous southern tribes are represented in every state, both on and off reservations. The Pamunkey Tribe still renders annual tributes of deer and turkey to the Virginia governor, a custom originating in the 17th century. Southern Indians on the Atlantic Coast like the Powhatans, had been in contact with both Europeans and Africans for a long time and gradually absorbed some elements of their lifestyles. All three racial groups shared on emerging folk culture that included elements of African, European, and Native American lifestyles.

Some contemporary Powhatans look like pictures of their early ancestors; others show the results of intermixture with other races. Regardless of genetic composition, Powhatans and other similiar southern Indians are still grappling with the problems of the past such as relationships with other races, cultural assimilation, and maintaining an Indian identity. Through a resurgence of ethnic pride, contemporary Powhatans are asserting their Native American heritage through spiritual ceremonies, public festivals, and the arts.

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